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Alaska National Guard

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176th Wing Public Affairs

Colony H.S. grad on first deployment for training with Air Guard

H.E. HOLT NAVAL COMMUNICATION STATION, Australia — As the most junior of the 31 Alaska Air National Guard members deployed to this remote outpost on the western tip of Australia, Airman 1st Class Phillip J. Gifford knows that, despite getting real work done every day, his role is primarily to learn by doing.

Gifford was not raised in a military family. A 2008 graduate of Colony High School, he joined the 176th Civil Engineer Squadron in March 2013 at the advice of friend and fellow Colony grad Aaron Brehm, who had signed up with the unit a few years prior. He said he was motivated by a combination of things, including the opportunity to serve in the military while remaining in Alaska, but particularly cited job training as a factor in his decision.

"There is so much opportunity in the CE Squadron," he said. "The skills you learn here — electrical work, HVAC, even dirt work — are skills you can apply in your outside life."

After enlisting, Gifford spent a sizeable portion of the next year away from the unit, first in basic training and then learning to operate heavy equipment at the Air Force's technical training school for engineers at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. There he was trained to use excavators, dump trucks, loaders and bulldozers, as well as on smaller tasks like runway repair.

Gifford says he was attracted to CE in particular because he'd always been good using his hands.

"I'd been working in landscaping for a long time — since middle school, I think," he said. "I just have kind of an ability to see a finished product. Like, if someone says we need a retaining wall here, I can usually see pretty much what it will look like and what needs to be done."

Gifford said he was happy to volunteer when he learned the squadron was planning a short deployment for training, or DFT, to Australia to help build a space radar facility. And the squadron was happy to have him, said the unit's senior non-commissioned officer, Chief Master Sgt. Keith Wilson.

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"At this early stage, the most important thing an Airman can do is to show good motivation," Wilson said. "If he or she does that, everything else will fall into place. And Gifford is showing us he's highly motivated. He's a heavy equipment operator, and on this deployment we don't have any heavy equipment work to do; but he's shown us he's happy to cross-train into other areas, and he's kept a positive attitude and worked hard."

As a new squadron member, Gifford says he is not intimidated by the technical demands of the job; he says his primary challenge will simply be learning how the squadron works.

"Knowing other people's personalities, how they work, and how to fit in with the overall operation — that's the thing," he said.

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Photo cutlines

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HOLT NAVAL COMMUNICATION STATION, Australia — Airman 1st Class Phillip J. Gifford pauses from working at this joint U.S.-Australian space radar facility on May 12, 2014. Gifford was among 34 members of the Alaska Air National Guard's 176th Wing to deploy here for two weeks to help build the facility and sharpen their skills. (U.S. Air Guard photo by Capt. John Callahan)

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HOLT NAVAL COMMUNICATION STATION, Australia — Airman 1st Class Phillip J. Gifford (center), Senior Airman Aaron Brehm (top) and Senior Master Sgt. Anthony Liberty (right), all of the Alaska Air National Guard's 176th Civil Engineer Squadron, level a drainage ditch at this remote base on Australia's western tip. Gifford and Brehm are graduates of Colony High School, in Alaska's Matanuska-Susitna Valley region. (U.S. Air Guard photo by Capt. John Callahan)